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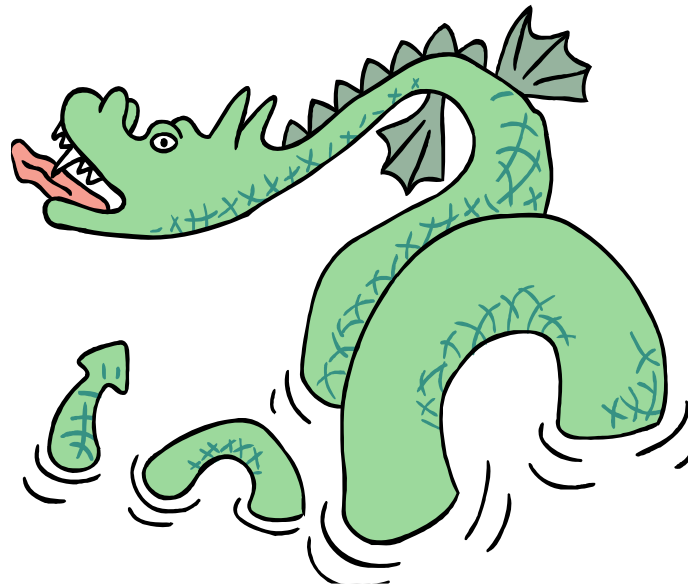
# *Sid the Serpent Who Wanted to Sing*

An Opera in One Act

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## **GENERAL OPERA INFORMATION**

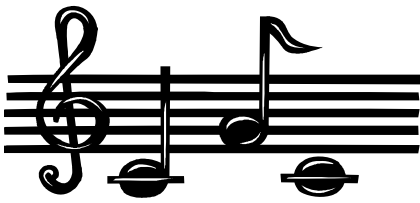


# General Opera Information

This section includes general opera information that can be used as handouts, to give students (and teachers) a better understanding of the world of opera. Some handouts even include comprehension questions for your students to answer.

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## Glossary

Listed below are words commonly associated with Opera. Learning these words will help you understand the individual pieces that, when put together, form an opera production.

### Elements of Opera

#### **Actor** (ak tər)

A performer who has dialogue or significant action, but who does not sing.

#### **Aria** (är ē ə)

Literally translated, aria means air. Since a singer's voice travels on air, the Italians decided to call the songs they sing arias. In an aria, the characters usually share their inner thoughts or feelings.

#### **Bravo** (brä vō)

This is a word that audience members shout to the singers if they think they have done a good job. Bravo in Italian means GREAT! If the singer is a female, the word to use is *brava*.

#### **Cast** (kast)

All the singers and actors who appear on stage.

#### **Chorus** (kôr əs)

A group of singers (made up of all voice parts) who mostly sing together; sometimes this group contains actors and dancers who do not sing, but who are part of the group as a whole.

#### **Comprimario** (kəm pri mā riō)

From the Italian, meaning "next to the first". A singer who performs a small character role in an opera. Confidants (a person you trust to tell your secrets to), maids, servants and messengers are often in this category.

#### **Conductor** (kən duk tər)

The individual who determines the musical direction of the singers and orchestra during the performances. They use specific patterns of movement with his or her hands and a baton (similar to a wand).

#### **Libretto** (li bret ò)

The libretto of an opera is the same as the script of a play. It is the words or text of an opera. The person who writes these words is called the librettist.

#### **Opera buffa** (op ə ə bu fə)

A comic opera. *Così fan tutte* is an example of an opera buffa.

#### **Opera seria** (op ə ə ser ē ə)

An opera with a story that is very serious. Usually, one of the characters dies in the end.

**Orchestra** (ôr kə strə)

In most cases, operas are accompanied by a group of musicians. Led by a conductor, an orchestra is an ensemble (a group of performers) that is comprised of string, woodwind, brass and percussion instruments.

**Overture** (ō vər chər)

An orchestral piece that may be played at the very beginning of the opera before any action takes place on the stage (not all operas have overtures).

**Principal** (prin sə pəl)

A singer who portrays a primary character of an opera, often times heroes/heroines or villains.

**Recitative** (res i tā'tiv)

The English word, recite, both looks and means the same as the Italian word recitative. A recitative is the part of an opera in which the singers talk to each other. The music of a recitative tries to imitate the rhythms and inflections of speech.

**Score** (skôr)

Musicians read from a score which is a notated piece of music showing each vocal or instrumental part on its own staff. (*See Mozart biography section for example*)

**Supernumerary** (sōō pər nōō'mə rer'ē)

A performer who appears in a non-singing/non-speaking role, like an "extra" in a movie.

**Vocal categories**

\* Webster's American Dictionary, College Edition, copyright 1997 by Random House

**Contralto** (kən tral tō)

The lowest female voice part. Often contraltos play old women, witches, comic roles.

**Baritone** (bar i tōn)

A male voice between the tenor and bass. Usually they are helpful companions or villains but occasionally can be the hero.

**Bass** (bās)

The lowest male singing voice. Usually basses play kings, villains and priests.

**Mezzo-soprano** (mez ō sə pră nō)

Mezzo means middle and a mezzo-soprano is the female voice in the middle, between the soprano and contralto. You see these voice parts most often in the parts of mothers, older women, villains, and servants. Sometimes mezzo-sopranos even play young boys! These roles are called "trouser roles".

**Soprano** (sə pră nō)

The highest singing voice in women and children. Most often the heroine of the opera.

**Tenor** (ten ər)

The highest male voice part. Tenors most often are the romantic heroes of an opera.



## A BRIEF LOOK AT OPERA

The Italian word *opera* is derived from the Latin word *opus*, which means 'work' (each piece written by a composer is called an 'opus'). Opera is often defined as a play in which the words are sung rather than spoken, but this definition is too simple. A better definition is *drama through music*. The music is a partner; it does not merely accompany the drama, it adds to it. Furthermore, an opera is staged and must be seen to be appreciated to its fullest. It is truly an *audio-visual* art form. While opera combines music, plot and the 'spectacle' provided by the sets, staging, costumes, etc., the final result is much more than the sum of its parts. It is an emotional experience.

The plot of an opera does not move the way it does in a play. Time stands still at times for arias, in which the characters express their emotions. This means an opera must be much more condensed than a play. For example, Shakespeare's *Othello* has over 4,000 lines of verse. Verdi's *Otello*, his opera created from the play, has only about 800, yet the most important elements of the story are still there.



*Claudio Monteverdi*

Although opera as we know it started during the Italian Renaissance, its beginnings go back to ancient Greek drama. We don't know what it sounded like, but the ancient Greeks never thought of separating the drama from music. The Greek plays were accompanied by strings or pipes and the words were sung or half-spoken. Dance was also part of the drama. The early church gave structure to chants and the accompanying music, supplying scales and notation. At first there were only single-line melodies, but later these were woven together to form polyphony (several different lines of music at once) and thus, harmonies. By the end of the fifteenth-century, it was the custom in Italy to perform short musical dramas during the intermissions of other plays. These *intermedii* were accompanied by small orchestras. An example is *La favola d'Orfeo* by Poliziano in which there were solo songs and a chorus, mixed in with spoken dialogue. In 1576 a group of Florentine writers and musicians formed the *Camerata*, whose purpose was to try to recreate what they thought was original Greek drama, words spoken or sung to a single line of music, like our present-day **recitative**. One of the members of this group was Vincenzo Galilei, father of the famous scientist, Galileo.

Operas were performed in private homes until the first public opera house was built in Venice in 1637. Jacopo Peri (1561-1633) was a member of the *Camerata* and is credited with writing the first opera *Dafne*, based on a Greek myth. Although it became famous throughout Europe, it is now lost. The earliest composer whose works are still regularly performed is Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643). He blended the music and the poetry of the libretto to create an emotional experience. Such early operas were usually based on history or mythology, such as *Giulio Cesare (Julius Caesar)* by Handel (1685-1759), the composer of *Messiah*, and Monteverdi's operas about Orpheus and Ulysses. This kind of opera is called an *opera seria*, in contrast to the *opera buffa*, or comic opera, which would develop later (the only lighter early operas were pastoral stories about shepherds and shepherdesses). During this period, the words were most important, with the small orchestras providing a simple accompaniment. No musical line was written for the instrumentalists. Instead, they played the singers' lines. The first opera produced in the Americas was given at the vice regal court in Lima, Peru in 1701. It was *La Purpura de la Rosa* by Torrejon y Velasco.

One of the last composers to write *opera seria* was Mozart (1756-1791), but he was also one of the first to write about 'real' people, such as contemporary nobility and their servants. A great example of this is *Le nozze di Figaro (The Marriage of Figaro)*. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the emphasis was on *bel canto*; or 'beautiful singing'. Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* is a fine example of this type of opera. During that century, the trend was toward large-scale spectacles, including the operas of Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) such as *Aida* and Puccini's *Turandot*. Close personal relationships were also portrayed, such as that between Alfredo and Violetta in Verdi's *La traviata*. Wagner (1813-1883), the exponent of '**music drama**', took us back to mythological themes, but with an entirely different type of singing and music. In contrast to the simple accompaniments of early *opera seria*, Wagner's orchestra is dominant. His music shapes the drama and helps to tell the story. He also used *leitmotifs* to describe each character.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the development of *verismo* opera was telling us stories of the seamier side of life among the lower classes, and the singing became more conversational.

Operas are still being written today – *Margaret Garner* by the American composer Richard Danielpour, which premiered in 2005, is an example. Many operas have been written by American composers. Examples are: *The Ballad of Baby Doe* by Douglas Moore, and *The Face on the Barroom Floor* by Henry Mollicone, both about early Colorado; *Akhmaten* by Phillip Glass and *Antony and Cleopatra* by Samuel Barber, both set in ancient Egypt; *Of Mice and Men*, *Susannah* and *The Passion of Jonathan Wade* by Carisle Floyd; *The Tender Land* by Aaron Copland, about a midwestern farm family of the 1930's; and the well-known Christmas opera, *Amahl and the Night Visitors* by Gian Carlo Menotti. A new opera, *Our Town* by Ned Rorem was recently performed in Winston-Salem.

## CREATING AN OPERA

(see the **Glossary** for the definition of terms which may be unfamiliar  
Key words are in **bold**)

**T**he story of an opera is not usually an original work. Many opera librettos are based on plays or novels (***Carmen***), on Bible stories, on mythology or fairy tales (***Cinderella***), or on historic events (***Nixon in China***). For example, several of Shakespeare's plays, including *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet*, have been made into operas. Some **composers** write their own words, but far more often, the text is written by a librettist. The composer not only writes the musical lines but also orchestrates them (writes the parts for each instrument of the orchestra and for each singer). The finished product is the **orchestral score** used by the conductor during the performance. **Piano-vocal scores** are often used by the singers and the stage director. These have the musical lines for all of the voices, but with the music for the orchestra reduced so that it can be played on the piano.

Once the score for a new opera is finished, or an established work is chosen, the **artistic director** of the producing company, in consultation with his **executive director**, chooses the **conductor, director, designers, and singers**.

The conductor and director agree on the exact version of the opera that will be used. The director decides how to interpret the opera and works with the designers to translate this interpretation into sets and costumes. Sketches of both are then prepared. Often a company rents existing sets and costumes for a production from another company, or several companies will cooperate on a **co-production**.

**Costumes and wigs** are created or rented. If there is a ballet or dance as part of the opera, a **choreographer** (the person who creates the movements for the dancers) is chosen to create the dance patterns. If the opera is new to them, the leads or **principal singers** start to learn their parts. All this is done many months, sometimes years, before the scheduled performance date.

The **production manager** deals with scheduling of rehearsal time for orchestra, chorus, principal singers, **supernumeraries** or **supers**, etc., and for the arrivals of people, sets and costumes.

The first to start rehearsing are the members of the **chorus** under the direction of the **chorus master**. Since most operas are sung in foreign languages, singers who do not speak the language of a particular opera must learn the words phonetically.

The early music rehearsals are with piano only, often led or accompanied by the **assistant conductor**. There are also stage rehearsals, without music, in which the personalities of the roles are discussed and the participants are given the **blocking** (specific movements, entrances, exits, etc.) by the director. This is done for everyone who will appear on stage, leads, chorus, and **supers**. The dancers are taught the choreography.

The conductor begins to rehearse the **orchestra**, and once the orchestra is ready, the singers are added at a *sitzprobe* or seated rehearsal. **Sitzprobe**, a German word pronounced zitsprobə,

means a seated rehearsal. At this rehearsal, the singers sing on the stage with the orchestra, but don't practice their blocking.

During a rehearsal, the **stage manager** and the **production assistants** help the director by keeping track of the staging, telling the singers when and where to enter, and so on. The **property managers** set up the **props**.

Meanwhile, under the leadership of the **technical director**, the sets are loaded into the theater, and the scenery and props are set up by the **stagehands**. **Flymen** work the pieces of the set which are hung from above the stage and raised and lowered by ropes and pulleys. **Electricians** install any necessary wiring and lights are hung and focused. The stagehands also make any set changes which may be needed between acts during a performance. The **sound board operator** is responsible for sound effects such as bird calls, thunder, and shots. The **lighting board operator** operates the lights from a large panel, creating changes in time and other special effects.

The **libretto** is translated into English in order to create **supertitles**. Supertitles are shown on a screen above the stage. Since most operas are performed in a foreign language these translations help the audience to understand what is being sung on stage. It's just like reading subtitles in a foreign movie, only the words are on the top instead of the bottom.

Finally, all is brought together at the **Dress Rehearsal** to which students are invited. Last-minute adjustments are made during and after this rehearsal. Now the opera is ready for **Opening Night**. During the performance, the stage manager dictates when everything happens. Directions are given through a headset, which communicates with other members of the stage crew and production staff stationed throughout the theater.

### Comprehension Questions:

1. What role does the production manager fill in creating an opera?
2. True or False: The story of an opera is always from an original work.
3. Why do audiences often need supertitles?
4. Name three types of singers that can appear on stage in an opera.
5. It takes a lot of hard-working people to produce an opera. Do any of these jobs seem like something you would like to try and do? Why?

# A Checklist for Opera Singers

A good opera singer must have:

- ✓ **Volume:** Opera Singers are trained to be heard in large theatres without using microphones. Singers train for years to be able to sing loudly enough to be heard over other soloists, a chorus, and a large orchestra of about 50 musicians. How loudly can an opera singer sing? When a jet takes off, the sound reaches 110-120 decibels, the human threshold for pain. A powerful singer, singing very close to another person's ear, could reach up to 110 decibels.
- ✓ **Stamina:** Stamina is the strength or power to resist fatigue or stress; endurance. Opera requires the ability to sing for two to three hours. Operas are rarely performed on consecutive evenings because they are so physically exhausting for the performers. Piedmont Opera plans its schedule so that the artists can rest up for a day between performances. Piedmont Opera productions are performed on Friday evenings, Sunday afternoons, and Tuesday evenings.
- ✓ **Range:** Operatic music, as written, requires singers to have a wide vocal range; they must be able to sing very low notes as well as extremely high notes.
- ✓ **Acting ability:** Opera singers don't just stand on stage and sing – they must be able to act as well. Just like actors in a play, the singer must make the audience believe in the characters they portray.
- ✓ **Familiarity with different languages:** Since operas started in Europe, most of them were written in languages other than English. A singer must be familiar with the pronunciation of foreign languages, as well as the meaning of each word. It is not unusual for an American singer to perform in Italian, French, German, or even Russian.

