

Opera Dictionary

Opera

An **opera** is a musical drama or comedy where the actors sing rather than speak their lines. The word “opera” derives from the Latin word *opus*, which literally means “a work of art.” Like a play, an opera is performed on a stage with singing-actors, scenery, make-up, costumes, and lighting.

Opera is truly a multi-disciplinary art, which means that it is a combination of many art forms (Singing, orchestral music, theater, visual arts, dance, etc.) and subject areas (history, mythology, literature, etc.). Opera combines these disciplines in a very powerful way to tell a story. Opera can be funny, sad, scary, dramatic, mysterious, fantastical, or any combination of feelings or moods.

Libretto (meaning “little book” in Italian) contains all of the words of an opera. A libretto is usually shorter than the script for a play because it takes longer to sing lines than to say them, and because music is also a very important part of telling the story of an opera. The person who writes the words for an opera is often a poet or playwright, and is called a **librettist**.

Composer writes the music for the opera. All of the music, both vocal (for singers) and orchestral (for instrumentalists) is written in the **score** which separates lines for each instrument and each singer’s vocal part. The score, as a piece of music, reflects the mood, events, and emotions of the characters in the story.

Characters are the people in the story. Singers perform the parts of the characters, also called **roles**.

Performers – Voice Types

Soprano - The highest female voice. She is often the heroine of the opera and often in love with the tenor. A star soprano is often referred to as the “Prima Donna.”

Mezzo-Soprano - The lower female voice. The mezzo sound is typically darker and warmer than the soprano. The mezzo usually plays the older female character (like the mother), the bad guy (the witch), a seductress, or a boy. When the mezzo plays a male character, it is called a **pants** role.

Tenor - The highest male voice. He usually plays the hero of the opera and is often in love with the soprano.

Baritone - The lower (or middle) male voice. The baritone is often the villain, but can also be the hero who sacrifices himself for the tenor or soprano. In comedies, the baritone is often a prankster. He is usually in love with the soprano but loses her to the tenor.

Bass- The lowest male voice. He often plays the wise man or comic buffoon.

Orchestra - The group of instrumentalists who accompany the singers. They play under the stage in the orchestra pit where they are less likely to overpower the singers and distract from the action on the stage. However, though they are often not seen, the orchestra is an equal partner in the action of an opera.

Chorus - The group of singers who function as a unit onstage. Choruses are usually featured in crowd scenes where they represent the townspeople, partiers, soldiers, etc.

Dancers - Dance is often included in opera. They are usually part of big crowd scenes, but can also be featured as soloists in some pieces. Many operas contain short ballet sequences.

Production Team

Conductor - The person in charge of the musical interpretation of the opera. He also guides the orchestra through the opera from the first rehearsal to final performance.

Director - Responsible for the overall look or concept of the production. The director determines how the opera will be interpreted and tells everyone on stage when, where and how to move. Finally, he or she guides the performers on how characters are best presented.

Choreographer – Designs and sets the movement of the dancers.

Costume Designer – Designs and creates the clothes that singers wear to reflect aspects of the character played by the singer. Costumes should reveal a lot about a particular character such as their age, personal characteristics, period of time in which he or she lives, among other features of the role he or she plays.

Scenic Designer - Creates the visual background and set pieces for the opera. He or she creates small models and detailed blueprints which serve as the “instructions” for building the set.

Lighting Designer - Creates the lighting plan that emphasizes the drama of the moment and allows the audience to focus on the action. Lighting design is an important visual element that contributes to the ambience of the stage setting and affects the appearance of people, costumes and props onstage.

Stage Manager - Coordinates all of the elements of the show during rehearsal and performance. He or she is responsible for calling cues, scene changes, and organizing the backstage area so that the show runs smoothly and consistently.

Crew - This group of professionals is responsible for setting up and running all of the equipment for a performance, including changing the scenery, costumes, and props. They also open and close the curtain, operate trapdoors, run sound effects, and run quick costume changes.

Opera Parts

Opera is a **musical** form.

Orchestra provides the overriding musical texture, while the **singers** sing and act on the stage.

Overture is the piece of music played by the orchestra at the beginning of an opera. It usually, but not always, contains some of the musical themes from the opera and sets the mood for what the audience is about to experience.

Recitative (re-chi-ta-TEEV) is sung dialogue that propels the action forward. The singing is generally faster and is composed to sound more like speech.

Aria - An extended musical passage sung as a solo. It often explores emotions as a character absorbs, reflects, and makes decisions in the drama.

Duet - An extended musical passage for two singers. A **trio** is for three singers and a **quartet** is a piece for four singers.

Ensemble – An extended musical passage for more than four voices. Often, each character singing different words at the same time, and ensembles tend to occur at the most pivotal point in the drama or at the end of an act.

Supertitles – Since operas are most often performed in the language in which they were composed, most opera productions have translations above the stage (or in the seat in front of you) where the translation is projected to the audience to understand and better follow the story.

Other Opera Terms

el canto - Literally meaning “beautiful singing,” this term describes the specific style of vocal production that opera utilizes. It requires great breath control and ease.

Bravo - Literally, “brave” or “courageous,” this Italian word is a form of high praise that is shouted at times when applause is appropriate. **Bravo** is shouted when a man has sung thrillingly, and **brava** when a woman has done the same.

Cadenza - A brilliant passage in an aria—often improvised by the singer—that showcases the specific skills and strengths of that singer. **Cadenzas** are most often sung by women, although men can perform them as well.

Diva - Literally, “goddess,” refers to an important female opera star. The masculine form is **divo**.

Motif or Leitmotif (light-mo-teef) - While “leitmotif” is usually used to refer to the musical themes of Wagner, a *motif* is a recurring musical idea that reveals or recalls an earlier plot point, character, emotion, or idea in an opera. Keep an eye out for music that sounds familiar! It probably means something important!

Tempo - This refers to the speed at which music is performed. The conductor is in charge of setting the **tempo** or timing of an opera.

Cover/understudy - This is the person who learns a role, music and staging just in case the lead cannot perform due to sickness or injury... as we say in the theater, “The show must go on!”

Opera Dictionary Matching Activity

Match the term on the left with the correct definition on the right

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| 1) Soprano _____ | A) The group of instrumentalists who accompany the singers. |
| 2) Tenor _____ | B) The lower male voice. |
| 3) Choreographer _____ | C) Sung dialogue that propels the action forward. |
| 4) Orchestra _____ | D) The music that the composer wrote. |
| 5) Recitative _____ | E) A piece of music with two singers. |
| 6) Aria _____ | F) The highest male voice. |
| 7) Overture _____ | G) The person who creates the vision of the production, sets staging, and guides designers and singers. |
| 8) Score _____ | H) The lower female voice. |
| 9) Baritone _____ | I) The words that a composer sets to music. |
| 10) Mezzo-Soprano _____ | J) The highest female voice. |
| 11) Duet _____ | K) The people who work backstage. |
| 12) Director _____ | L) An extended musical solo. |