

An Introduction to Opera

Voice Types in Opera

Soprano	coloratura, lyric, soubrette, spinto, German dramatic
Mezzo-soprano	dramatic, lyric
Contralto	
Tenor	lyric, spinto, Heldentenor, countertenor
Baritone	lyric, Italian dramatic, German dramatic, bass-baritone
Bass	basso profundo, basso cantante, basso buffo, schwarzer bass

A Small Glossary of Opera Terms

Opera	A musical, dramatic work in which the artists sing all or some of their parts; an elaborate art form that includes all the creative arts. Similar to plays, operas are divided into acts and scenes, sometimes called tableaux. An Overture and a Finale often bookend the main action.
Overture	Orchestral music that is played before the action of the opera; usually played before the curtain is flown out.
Recitative	Sung dialogue; characters sing a conversation to advance the plot.
Aria	A solo musical number sung by a principal artist to express emotion; "operatic time" slows or halts during an aria.
Duet	A musical piece for two singers; sometimes one sings after the other, sometimes two singers sing simultaneously creating harmony.
Ensemble	A piece for more than two soloists; trio, quartet, quintet, or sextet.
Chorus	A musical piece written in four or more parts for a large number of singers; chorus music comments on the action, provides repose in the plot, provides activity in a crowd scene, or supports a principal's singing.
Coloratura	Singing with elaborate ornamentation; includes trills, flourishes, and quick runs and scales.
Libretto	Literally "little book"; the text that is sung in an opera.
Supernumeraries:	Non-singing, non-speaking roles; extras in crowd scenes.
Supertitles:	English translations of the sung text that are projected on a screen above the stage. (ALSO: surtitles, Optrans, titles)

Conventions of Opera

Language: Most operas are performed in the language of the composer, most commonly Italian, French, and German. There are operas in every language, including a substantial number in English.

Orchestra: The central ensemble of opera, the orchestra creates musical support for the singers and provides atmosphere.

Slow delivery of words: Sung words take longer to sing than spoken words, so opera librettos are much shorter than plays. Because music can express emotion more powerfully than speech, fewer words can express emotions powerfully.

Stage crafts: The theatrical and visual elements of opera that make it a spectacle; includes scenery, lighting, makeup, costumes, props, and supernumeraries.

Use of musical themes or motives: A signal, or musical idea, that is associated with a particular character, idea, object, or emotion. Motives can recall a previous moment or situation later in the opera.

A Brief History of Opera

Historical Period	Features	Opera examples
Camerata	In Florence around 1600, a group of intellectuals met to develop Drama through Music.	Peri's <i>Euridice</i>
1700s	Audiences cry at serious operas (<i>opera seria</i>) and laugh at comic operas (<i>opera buffa</i>).	Pergolesi's <i>La serva padrona</i>
Baroque opera	Predictable, <i>da capo</i> arias (ABA form) usually began with a dry recitative, accompanied by harpsichord; also called exit arias, because each singer would express a single emotion and clear the stage. Castrati singers were all the rage.	Handel's <i>Julius Caesar</i>
Classical era	Mozart linked important musical ideas throughout his operas.	Mozart's <i>The Magic Flute</i>
Bel canto years	Beautiful singing was embraced in the early 1700s; representative composers include Bellini, Donizetti, and Rossini.	Donizetti's <i>Don Pasquale</i>
Verdi years	The second half of 1800s was dominated by energetic, Italian style dramas.	Verdi's <i>Rigoletto</i>
Opéra Comique	French musical entertainment that included spoken dialogue; not necessarily comic.	Bizet's <i>Carmen</i>
Lyric Opera	Sentimental, mainly French opera.	Gounod's <i>Faust</i>
Verismo	Operas that depicted truth; celebrated graphic, raw emotions.	Mascagni's <i>Cavalleria Rusticana</i> Puccini's <i>La bohème</i>
Music Drama	Wagner's concept of opera, in which words and music tell mythic stories	Wagner's <i>Tristan and Isolde</i>