

Words you should know before you go see the show

In the opera score...

The **libretto** contains all of the words of an opera. Italian for "little book," 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 playwright or poet and is called a **librettist**.

The **composer** writes the music for the opera. All of the music, both vocal (for singers) and orchestral (for instrumentalists) is written in the **score** with separate 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**.

A **synopsis** is a short written summary of the story.

The **overture** is a piece of music played by the orchestra to begin the 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 see.

Recitative, pronounced re-chi-ta-TEEV, is sung dialogue that propels the action of the story. The singing is generally faster with a rhythm more like regular speech.

An **aria** is an extended musical passage sung as a solo (by one person). It is often very lyrical and accompanied by the orchestra, conveying the emotions of the character at a particular point in the story. The action usually stops while an aria is sung.

A **duet** is an extended musical passage for two singers, a **trio** is sung by three singers, a **quartet** is a piece for four singers, and so on.

An **ensemble** is an extended musical passage for four or more singers. Very often each performer in an ensemble is singing different words and different musical lines.

Choral scenes usually feature the principal and secondary cast members with the chorus. The sheer number of voices on stage is usually reserved for moments of high drama and spectacle. Dancers might also be featured in a big choral scene.

The **finale** is the last number in an act. It usually involves many singers and is very dramatic.

Supertitles or **surtitles** are the translation of the words of an opera projected above the stage at the same time the character(s) on stage is singing them. When an opera is in a different language, this helps people understand what is going on. Even if an opera is performed in English, supertitles are often used to help the audience follow the story.

Onstage and in the pit...

The **Music Director** is responsible for the interpretation of the score. The Music Director is also usually the **conductor**, who is responsible for the musical interpretation and coordination of the performance. The conductor stands at the front of the orchestra pit and uses a **baton** (a short white stick) and his/her arms and body to interpret the music, cue singers and instrumentalists and keep the beat so everybody stays together. **Maestro** (**maestra** for a woman) is the Italian word for conductor (literally "master") and is a term of great respect.

Soprano is the highest female voice. She is often the heroine of the opera and frequently, she is in love with the tenor. A star soprano is often referred to as the "Prima Donna."

Mezzo-soprano, or just mezzo, is the second highest, or middle, female voice. The mezzo sound is typically darker and warmer than the soprano. The mezzo usually plays the older female character (like the mother), a villainess (like a witch), a seductress, or a young man or boy. When the mezzo plays a male character, she will be dressed in men's clothes, thus it is called a **pants** or **trouser role**. This convention became popular in the 17th Century as a woman's voice is stronger than a boy's voice.

Alto, also called **contralto**, is the lowest female voice. The alto often plays an old woman, who can either be wise and good or an old witch.

The **tenor** is the highest male voice and is usually the hero of the opera and generally in love with the soprano.

Baritone is the next lowest, or middle, male voice. The baritone is often a villain but can sometimes be a hero who sacrifices himself for the tenor and/or soprano. In a comedy, the baritone is usually the one pulling all kinds of pranks. The baritone is often in love with the soprano but usually loses her to the tenor.

The **bass** has the lowest male voice. He very often plays a wise old man or sometimes a comic character (**basso buffa**). **Basso profundo** describes the lowest bass voice.

Supernumeraries or "**supers**," appear on stage in costume in non-singing and non-speaking roles.

The **orchestra** is the group of instrumentalists who accompany the singers. They play under the stage in the orchestra pit where they will be less likely to overpower the singers and detract from the physical action on stage. Even though the orchestra is not on stage, the instrumentalists are equal partners with the singers in performing an opera.

The **chorus** is a group of singers who function as a unit on stage. Choruses can be for mixed voices, men only, women only, or children. They are usually featured in crowd scenes where they can represent townspeople, soldiers, pilgrims, etc.

Dancers are often included in an opera. They are usually part of large crowd scenes but can be featured in solo roles as well. Many operas include a short ballet.

Backstage and behind the scenes...

Where do you start if you want to put on a production of an opera? Usually the General Director, Artistic Director or Music Director will pick the **repertoire**, or what operas will be performed. The performance is conceived by the **Production Team**, which consists of the Music Director/Conductor, Stage Director, Choreographer, Scene Designer, Costume Designer, Props Master, Lighting Designer and Technical Director. These people meet frequently to trade ideas and work together to ensure a cohesive interpretation of the piece from a visual, dramatic and musical standpoint.

The **Stage Director** (sometimes simply called the director) is 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 and where to move, creating "stage pictures" that enhance the story.

The **Choreographer** designs movement for the dancers and sometimes for chorus and other characters.

The **Costume Designer** designs and creates the clothes singers wear to reflect aspects of the character played by the singer and their significance in the story.

The **Scene Designer** creates the visual background and set pieces for the opera. He or she creates a small scale model of the set and detailed blueprints which serve as the "instructions" for building the set. He or she also works closely with the props master on hand props, furniture and set decoration.

The **Lighting Designer** creates a lighting plan that emphasizes the drama of the moment. Lighting design is an important visual element that contributes to the ambience of the stage setting and adds depth to the appearance of people, costumes and props on stage.

The **Technical Director** supervises everyone who is implementing the concepts of the designers. He or she works with carpenters, painters, electricians, sound designers and stagehands and oversees the building of sets and props and hanging of lights.

The **Stage Manager** coordinates the visual elements of a show during the performance. He or she is responsible for calling all the **cues** in the performance for the cast and crew. This means the stage manager warns the cast and crew when acts are about to begin and end, tells the conductor when to start, cues cast members for entrances,

and follows hundreds of detailed notes in the score to tell the crew when to change lighting, scenery, sound effects, and raise or lower the curtain.

The **Crew** (stagehands and props master) works behind the scenes and is responsible for setting up and running all of the equipment for a performance, including changing sets, placing and maintaining props, operating the lights, opening and closing the curtains, operating trap doors, sound effects, and assisting performers with costumes and makeup.

Other opera terms...

Bel canto, literally “beautiful singing,” describes the musical style of an opera that is lyrical and often very flowery.

Bravo, literally “brave” or “courageous,” is a form of applause when shouted by members of the audience at the end of an especially pleasing performance. Strictly speaking, bravo is for a single man, **brava** for a single woman and **bravi** for more than one performer.

Cadenza is a brilliant passage in an aria often improvised by the singer, usually in such a way as to best display his or her vocal talents. Cadenzas are virtuosic and rhythmically free.

Coloratura describes a voice that possesses unusual flexibility, able to sing many notes quickly over a wide range. This term is most often used to describe female voices, i.e. coloratura soprano or mezzo, but occasionally men will have this same ability.

The **concertmaster** or **concertmistress** is the first violinist who leads the orchestra in tuning at the beginning of each act and coordinates the strings section, deciding on the bowing so that all the bows move in unison.

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

Leitmotiv, “light-mo-teef,” is a short musical phrase associated with a particular character or event. These repeated musical themes can signal the entrance of a character, foreshadow an event, or help reveal what a character is feeling or thinking.

The **prima donna** is the leading female singer, or “first lady,” in an opera. Because of the way opera stars have behaved in the past, it often refers to someone who is acting in a superior and demanding way. **Diva** can have the same connotation.

Tempo refers to how fast or slow the music is performed. The conductor reads the composer’s markings and sets the speed of the music.

An **understudy** is someone who learns a main role in an opera in case the lead singer can’t perform for some reason. This is also called a **cover**, i.e. Miss Trill is covering the role of Buttercup.