

AUSTIN OPERA

it's an experience.

The Operatic Voice

Being an opera singer is hard work! Singers need to be physically strong and have superb technique in order to sustain long phrases (musical thoughts): this means they have excellent control of both the inhalation and the exhalation of their breath. Likewise, their voices must maintain a resonance (using cavities in the face to increase the audibility of the voice, even when singing quietly) in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and the chest cavities. All of this resonance is necessary to achieve the volume required to be heard above the orchestra that accompanies the singers. Opera singers do not usually use microphones, so they must project their voices throughout a whole theatre using only their muscles and technique! All voices are defined by both the actual voice “type” and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited. The range, pitch, and tone of a singer's voice will determine what kind of role they will play in the opera.

Watch [this video](#) from the Royal Ballet and Opera to hear the different voice types in action.

Below is a list of voice types (and ranges) commonly found in operas:

Treble Voice Types



Soprano (sopra = over)

The highest pitched female voice. Composers often (but not always) write the female lead role in an opera for a soprano. Soprano voices vary by sound type: coloratura sopranos, who can sing very high notes and rapid passages with ease; dramatic sopranos, whose voices have great power; and lyric sopranos, whose voices have exceptional beauty and can sustain long passages.



Photo: Hailey Clark in Austin Opera's production of *Pagliacci*.



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Mezzo soprano (“mezzo” = “médium”)

Lower than the soprano and higher than the contralto. Mezzos often play either the character of a young boy (this is called a trouser role), a complex character with energy and awareness of life, or an evil character. Bizet’s *Carmen* is one of the most famous mezzo roles in opera, and is a rare lead role for a mezzo.

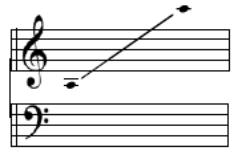


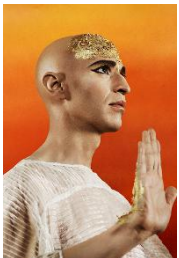
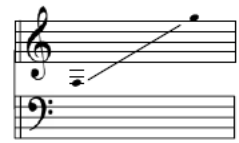
Photo: Cecilia Hall in Austin Opera’s production of *Carmen*.



Contralto (“contra” = “against” & “alto” = “high”)

The lowest pitched female voice, these singers have a deep, well-rounded sound. Contraltos are rarer than sopranos or mezzos, and they are usually given the role of a maid, mother, or grandmother.

Photo: Marian Anderson, one of the finest contraltos of her time and a force in the Civil Rights movement.



Countertenor (“contra” = against, tenor)

The highest pitched male voice, Countertenors typically sing in the mezzo-soprano range, using a well-developed falsetto technique combined with their full voice. They have a distinct, ethereal tone that is often described as bright, pure, and otherworldly. Countertenors are primarily associated with early music, particularly Baroque opera and sacred music, but they have also found a place in contemporary opera and even crossover genres.

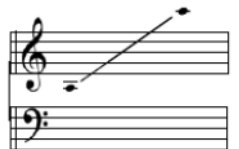


Photo: Anthony Roth Costanzo in the Metropolitan Opera’s production of *Akhnaten*.



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Non-Treble Voice Types



Tenor (“tenere” = “to hold”)

The highest sounding male voice: often the leading role. Tenors, like sopranos, can have a **lyric** or **dramatic** quality. Luciano Pavarotti was one of the world’s most famous lyric tenors. Tenors typically play characters that fall in love with sopranos.

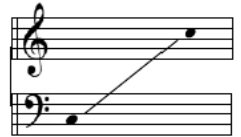


Photo: Efraín Corralejo in Austin Opera’s production of *Cruzar la Cara de la Luna*.



Baritone (from the Greek term for “deep sounding”)

These voices are more mellow-sounding and slightly lower than tenors. The roles sung by baritones are usually father figures or counts and other nobles, and these are often important roles in the story.

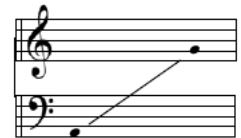


Photo: Will Liverman in Austin Opera’s production of *The Pearl Fishers*.



Bass (“low”)

Basses are the lowers sounding human voices, and they often play roles of wise and older characters in opera, like kings, emperors, or gods. They can also play profoundly evil characters. The **basso profundo** is the lowers voice in singing, and is commonly heard in Russian opera.

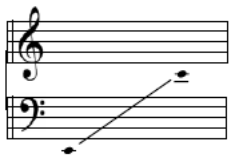


Photo: Musa Ngqungwana in Austin Opera’s production of *The Barber of Seville*.

